

Nayee Taleem- A Method of Teaching Enunciated by Mahatma Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi came up with a novel manner of imparting education.

Even though, the system of education in the country was too nervous to experiment with his ideas at the national level, in pockets his method, called Nayee Taleem is being followed to yield impressive results.

Two introductions need to be made. The first one is easy. Meet Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the great leader of the twentieth century. The second one is to the method of teaching as enunciated by him. He called it Nayee Taleem, which literally translated means New Education. As you go through the ideas that form the basis of Nayee Taleem, you realize, Gandhi had indeed loved and understood children and the learning process.

I will begin by relating my first encounter with Nayee Taleem. I had gone to Kausani. This is a small quiet station in the state of Uttar Pradesh, northeast of Delhi. The majestic Himalayas as the backdrop and valleys hurling down as surprises were filled with stories of dynamic enterprising village women. They had protested against the opening of a liquor shop at one village. At another they had resisted deforestation. And the women were as conversant with the written as well as the spoken word.

The most revealing encounter was on one of our treks. We met two young women who had come in the traditional attire including the scarf on their heads. They also carried with them what was carrying some brambles. With the spirit of reformation high in city-bred me, I asked them if they were literate. They said they were not and that they did not see why they should study. For one hour I explained to them why. At the end of it, they casually revealed they were doing their Masters in Sociology. They were home on vacation! Imagine my surprise and a feeling of utter foolishness. It took some time to reflect on the fact that all their education had not alienated them from their roots.

As I followed the source of such spirit in these women I was led to an uphill climb. No vehicle went up, you just had to trek it. It went up so many steps that I felt I would soon reach the heavens, and in a sense I did. I was at Laxmi Ashram at Kasauni. It was set up in 1946 by Katherine Helliman, better known in India as Sarla Behn, an ardent follower of Gandhi. Working with the people while building awareness for the fight for independence, Sarla Behn noticed the amount of hardship a woman from that region underwent. She decided, under Gandhi's encouragement and insistence, that this was where an institution based on Nayee Taleem should be set up. Beginning with three students, Lakshmi Ashram began imparting education to the people along Gandhian lines. Today the names of some of our major reformers and grass root workers figure in the school's alumni.

When we entered the complex that is spread over many acres of open land, we saw some students and the teachers preparing a bed for vegetable sowing. One student, far out across the hill, was out grazing cows. Others were in the kitchen making breakfast. Within half an hour when we had gone around the neat but simple complex, we came across yet another student. This time she was with a teacher trying to record the temperature from a barometer. The diverse activities were too distracting to the mind that went to see an ordinary school. I sat down to hear and read about Nayee Taleem, which was what the school was all about.

Gandhi, on his return to India from South Africa, was struck by the failure of the modern system of education. He argued that beginning with the language in which children were and continue to be taught, the school syllabus based on Macaulay's system, was irrelevant to the country's context. After accessing that kind of education, it alienated the student from his or her motherland and culture. Yet it did not make him vociferous.

any worthier. The student community that dominated the thinker leader's mind comprised eighty percent India's rural folk.

As he ruminated the problem in his mind, he decided the way to go about education, true education, was literary training through vocational training. Quoting Gandhi, I hold that true education of the intellect can come through a proper exercise and training of the bodily organs. In other words, the intelligent use of the bodily organs in a child provides the best and quickest way of developing his intellect. He went on to elaborate his idea with the example of a takli. The takli is the most primitive form of the spinning wheel. It is actually a tool that must have been fashioned before the discovery of the wheel. The use of the wheel for spinning came much later in history. The initial taklis could have been fashioned out of clay or wet flour, dried and a bamboo splinter passed through it. In some parts of Bengal and Bihar, this kind of tool is still used. Most cotton yarn in India was made of the takli yarn and the cottage industries still use it for finer counts of textiles.

There you are—that was just Gandhi's idea. Talk about the takli and you have to talk of the wheel, the science, the coming of mill cloth, the dying out of taklis, the regional variations of taklis, the areas where cotton is grown and so on. History, geography, science and arithmetic are all taught through practical experience.

The education system should go to the people, should lure them for its value, both economic and intellectual. He argued that primary education should be spread across seven years and should contain the entire syllabus that children study till they leave school. In addition they will pick up one vocational skill. The takli was an example, it could be anything. Another quote from Gandhi's writings would be in order: Then as to primary education, my confirmed opinion is that the commencement of training by teaching the alphabet and reading and writing, hampers their intellectual growth. I would not teach them the alphabet till they have had an elementary knowledge of history, geography, mental arithmetic and art. Through these three I should develop their intelligence. A question may be asked how intelligence can be developed through the takli or the spinning wheel. It can to a marvelous degree if it is not taught mechanically. When you tell a child the reason for the process, when you explain the mechanism of the takli, when you give him/her the history of cotton and its connection with civilization itself and take him to the village field where it is grown and teach him to till the village field where it is grown and teach him to count the rounds he spins and the method of finding the evenness and strength of the yarn, you hold his interest and simultaneously train his eyes, hands and mind. I should give six months to this preliminary training. The child is now probably ready for learning how to read the alphabet and, when he is able to do so rapidly he is ready to learn simple drawing and when he has learnt to draw geometric figures and the figures of birds etc., he will draw not scrawl the figures of the alphabet. I consider writing as a fine art. We kill it by imposing the alphabet on little children and making it the beginning of learning.

Gradually vocation should serve a dual process; it should pay for the student's course and also develop his character. Land, building and equipment are not to be covered by the student's labor. All crafts that are widely practiced in India can be taught with minimal investment. The self-supporting aspect of Gandhi's New Education formula was in his opinion the only way to carry education to the crores of children in India awaiting education.

Higher education should be left to private enterprises and for meeting national requirements. The state universities should be purely examining bodies.

So when I looked up and saw the child returning from grazing the cows, I wondered what she would have associated with it—different types of greenery, love towards animals, the food cycle, milk, dairy farming... the young women emerging from the kitchen, what would they have learnt about fire, cooking, nourishment...

nutrition, agriculture and the growth of rice and pulses. A new desire seemed to sprout in me. I wished I could go back in time and sit amidst nature to learn.